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TURGENIEFF AS A PLAYWRIGHT

BY OLIVER M. SAYLER

WHEN the art and the literature of two countries are as widely separated by the barrier of languages expressed in dissimilar alphabets as those of Russia and America, it is small wonder that contemporary men and movements are often delayed in transit from one nation to the other, and that Moscow and Petrograd are as unaware to-day of the existence of Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay as we are of Igor Severianin and Vassily Kamyensky. It is not so easy, though, to understand how after years of acquaintance with and admiration for a master of letters like Ivan Turgenieff, we can still be unacquainted with the plays he wrote, and ignorant even of the fact that he ever turned his hand to the drama.

Turgenieff as playwright is an aspect of the great rival of Tolstoy and Dostoievsky of which we are almost completely unaware, and yet an aspect which no Russian is willing for a moment to forget. His contributions to the theatre were limited in number, in comparison with his voluminous output of novels and stories, but that is not a sufficient reason for his biographers and critics and translators in western lands to pass them by unnoticed, for some of them are not only the equal in literary power of his best work in other fields, but they have also won an enviable place purely as drama on their native stage. As acted drama on our own stage, they might not measure up to our demand for decisive action, although one or two of the shorter pieces should fulfil our specifications in this respect. We may not be ready, either, in our hasty and slipshod method of mounting plays, to do them the patient and sympathetic justice which they would require. But they are so thoroughly in the vein of Turgenieff's narrative manner of depicting the life of his native country, and so worthy merely in a literary sense to stand beside his novels and tales, that they should be made available for the

reading public which is attracted to-day as never before to the art and letters of Russia.

My first impression when I saw on the Moscow Art Theatre bulletin, shortly after the playhouses reopened following the Bolshevik Revolution, the announcement that the repertory of the following week would include *A Month in the Country*, a "comedy in five acts by I. S. Turgenieff", was that someone had made a play out of one of the novelist's stories. Which one, I could not tell from the title. It might be *A Sportsman's Notebook*; or *Virgin Soil*. The Art Theatre, I knew, had thus brought effectively to its stage several of the novels of Dostoievsky, such as *The Brothers Karamazoff*, *Nikolai Stavrogin* (dramatized from *The Possessed*), and *The Village Stepanchikovo*, although Dostoievsky had never written for the stage nor remotely intended his stories to be used thereon. My next impression, after I was informed that *A Month in the Country* had been composed originally as a play, was that it would prove to be an inferior *étude* of the author, a typical novelist's play unsuited for the stage and honored by his compatriots merely out of respect for his other work; else why had we never heard of it outside Russia? This second surmise, however, proved to be as groundless as the first, for in performance at the hands of Stanislavsky's players it was disclosed as a suave and mannerly transcript of Russian life,—not so much a drama of action according to conventional formulas as a rich and illuminating panorama of personalities and incidents on the estate of a landed proprietor in the days of 1840, brought to vivid representation as drama on the stage. And for double proof of Turgenieff's talents as a playwright, the Art Theatre revived from its storehouse later in the same season a group of shorter works, including a masterpiece in droll humor, *The Lady from the Provinces*; another glimpse in miniature of the same life which *A Month in the Country* depicts, *Where the Thread's Weakest, There It Breaks*; and the first act of a longer play in more sombre mood, *The Boarder*.

A Month in the Country was written in 1850, at about the time of the death of the author's mother. Turgenieff was thirty-two years of age, and had written only occasional poems and sketches, which were later collected under the title, *A Sportsman's Note-*

book. Tradition in Russia has it that in the leading character of the play, Rakitin, he drew an autobiographical portrait, and that Rakitin's hopeless love for Madame Islaieva had its counterpart in the author's own life. It is this tradition which has induced Stanislavsky whenever he plays the rôle to make up in the likeness of the Turgenieff of that period.

The curtain rises on a salon done in the grand style of native Russia crossed with imported France, reflection of the same fashion which led the playwright's mother to teach him nothing but French and compelled him to learn his own tongue from the peasant servants. Natalia Petrovna Islaieva and Mihail Alexandrovitch Rakitin form one of two groups in the salon. They are reading to each other, but only fitfully, for their minds wander to Byelaieff, a student who has come to tutor Natalia's son, Kolya. Natalia displays more than a passing interest in the young man with his bold, free and unabashed manner, and proposes completing his education against the advice of Rakitin. Dr. Shpigelsky arrives, ostensibly to tend the coachman but really to press the suit of Bolshintsoff, a neighbor, for the hand of Vyerotchka, Natalia's adopted daughter. The girl comes racing in from a morning at play and Mme. Islaieva's answer to the doctor is, "She is a mere child!" At Islaieff's entrance, his wife departs, unable to endure his blunt, practical ways, but when he takes Rakitin away to view some new improvement on the estate she returns to a confidential scene with the tutor. Envy and suspicion enter her mind, though, when she sees the young man and Vyerotchka talking and laughing together, and on their departure she informs the doctor that she might consider his friend's proposal, after all.

The garden on Islaieff's estate is fitting locale for the growing love of Vyerotchka for Byelaieff, and it serves as well for an amusing scene wherein the doctor coaches the awkward Bolshintsoff for the ordeal of courtship. The third act returns indoors to recount the deepening rivalry between mother and foster-daughter, Byelaieff's shocked denial to Natalia that he loves the girl, and Rakitin's unrequited concern for Natalia. A summer-house on the estate is rendezvous in the fourth act for Vyerotchka and Byelaieff; the girl's dream is shattered, and in her anger and

excitement on the appearance of Natalia she accuses her mother of being her rival, and runs away weeping. Natalia and the tutor, thus thrown together, confess their love for each other, only to be surprised in turn by Rakitin. The last act, once more in the great salon, discloses Islaieff and his mother deeply worried over Natalia and the love they think she bears for Rakitin. Islaieff consults with his guest, and Rakitin decides it would be best for him to leave. As he bids them all farewell, Byelaieff suddenly understands that he himself has been the cause of all this tangled web of misdirected affections, and in a rush of remorse such as only a Russian can comprehend, he, too, departs, and life on the estate resumes its monotonous course above the wreckage of unfulfilled passions.

A play of so slender a narrative thread, of course, places a heavy burden on everyone concerned with its production. I know of no other producer except Stanislavsky, no other company except that of the Moscow Art Theatre, which could overcome the obstacle of this element of passivity. Constant training together through years of experiment, however, and a keen, almost intuitive, sense of atmospheric ensemble resulting from this intimate collaboration, have enabled these players not only successfully to master the difficulty inherent in Turgenieff's comedy, but even to capitalize it and make it serve positive ends. On its first inclusion in the repertory of the Art Theatre in the season of 1909-10, critical Moscow was unanimous that Stanislavsky had made the play expressive of all that Turgenieff means to the Russian heart. Here was set forth with unbroken illusion that romantic fineness of feeling and sensitive understanding of character which runs through all of Turgenieff's work; here, too, was a compelling and moving glimpse of that sadness and hopelessness which is so deeply ingrained in the Russian soul. I have maintained elsewhere that the secret of the Moscow Art Theatre's use of realism as a mode of artistic expression is a calculated minimization, a toning down of life to make its portrayal seem more convincing; and it is this minimization, this frank and courageous utilization of subdued tones throughout the performance, which helps Stanislavsky to achieve the emotional effect that Turgenieff intended.

One of Russia's foremost living artists, Mstislaff Dobuzhinsky, collaborated with Stanislavsky as designer of the four settings of the play, contributing through his lighting and his sense of design and locale a sympathetic understanding not only of the playwright's mood but of the grand manner of life under the first Tsar Nicholas. Stanislavsky and Katchaloff alternate in the rôle of Rakitin, but each makes him the model of unruffled gentility. Massalitinoff's Islaieff is in fitting contrast, but as urbane as a courtier when measured by the manners of to-day. Moskvin's Doctor and Luzhsky's Bolshintsoff are admirable examples of the droll humors which high comedy can achieve within the bounds of the strictest realism. Mme. Knipper, Tchehoff's widow, is proof in the rôle of Natalia of the power of repression in the depiction of jealous affection. And Mlle. Korenieva as Vyerotchka supplies an enchanting lyric note to one of Turgenieff's most engaging feminine portraits.

A wholly different aspect of Turgenieff as playwright emerged in the Moscow Art Theatre's programme of short plays from his pen which was first included in the repertory in the season of 1911-12. There is not so great a variation in mood and manner in *The Boarder*, the first act of which was presented as a self-sufficient play, for it is dependent on intimate characterization rather than on incident. Its story deals with that curious phase of the old Russian social and family life which persisted occasionally at least until the time of the Revolution—the presence in the household of landed proprietors, or of well-to-do dwellers in the towns and cities, of an outsider who is blessed with birth or breeding or a fortunate past, but who has been reduced in circumstances to the point where he will accept a living in a strange *menage*. Dostoievsky deals with such a figure in Foma Fomitch Opiskin, the leading character in *The Village Stepanchikovo*, which has just been published in an English translation under the title, *The Friend of the Family*; but Opiskin had so capitalized his fortuitous position that he had become absolute master over the feelings and the finances of his benefactors. Kuzovkin in Turgenieff's play is a less vigorous personality, the butt of everyone's jokes, and almost a tragic figure in his compulsory sufferance of humiliation. *The Boarder* is laid in a country house over a

hundred years ago, and the author has made it eloquent of the crudeness, the bluntness, and the lack of refinement which characterized all but the heads of the household in the days before the introduction of western customs brought about the metamorphosis which is evident in the picture presented by *A Month in the Country*. The scenes with the servants are like nothing so much as the corresponding incidents with the awkward attendants in an English country house in Goldsmith's *She Stoops To Conquer*.

There is even less divergence from the style of *A Month in the Country* in another of the short plays, *Where the Thread's Weakest, There It Breaks*, a comedy of manners and of finely analyzed affections out of the same life and time as the longer play. In fact, it is almost *A Month in the Country* in miniature, and for it Dobuzhinsky designed and devised a salon setting reminiscent of the grandiose airs of that of the longer play, only more delicately shimmering in its representation of the suave artificiality of the age and the sentimental atmosphere of the Russian countryside under intense summer suns.

Originality, however, comes to the fore in still another of the short plays, *The Lady from the Provinces*. Here Turgenieff dispensed with his sometimes cloying sentiment and substituted light and engaging and even satiric humors. His attention is no less devoted to the painstaking drawing of character, but he does not rest satisfied with that service alone, for he has built up in this masterly example of the one act play a fabric of plot and incident, slender but amusing, which should make it a pleasant acquaintance on the stage of any country. Alexei Ivanovitch Stupendieff, Daria Ivanovna, his wife, and the Count Valerian Nikolaievitch Lyubin, are the leading characters. Stupendieff is an official in a small district-capital, and the play unfolds in his home in a parlor of mid-Victorian fuss and feathers. He is a blunt but well-meaning fellow; his wife is an amiable and light-hearted, not to say flirtatious, young person who is bored by the hum-drum of life so far from the gayety of the city.

To this quiet but potentially restless scene comes the lackey of the Count Lyubin announcing the approach of his excellency, and wearing his hat in the house in the fulness of his pride. Stupendieff makes him take it off, not once, but numerous times,

until the count is heard in the hallway. Everyone disappears unceremoniously, permitting the visitor to enter a vacant room. When the ends of self-importance have been served, Stupendieff returns formally, followed by his wife. The latter and the count exchange a glance of recognition as Stupendieff pleads an engagement elsewhere and leaves them alone together. The two talk of the old and romantic days before she had left the city, and the count, becoming amorous despite his more than middle age, moves closer in recalling the past. Daria Ivanovna finally permits him to kiss her hand, but just for a moment. On his departure to get his music, she reflects lightly on the chances of life which have brought her to this secluded nook of the empire, but her reverie is broken by the return of her husband, who requests his dinner at three, and then, on overhearing the count humming a tune outside, pretends to be called away once more. At the piano, the titled visitor, in atrocious voice, and Mme. Stupendieva proceed with their flirtation, but the suspicious husband breaks in upon them, only to find them harmlessly occupied. He extricates himself awkwardly but a moment later returns again, only to find his apprehensions still unfulfilled. He risks a third trial, though, and this time he catches the count on his knees before his wife, unable on account of his age and stiffness to rise gracefully or promptly and the butt of the heartless laughter of the Lady from the Provinces, who has used him to point a needed lesson to her grumbling husband.

In the Moscow Art Theatre's production of this delightful bit of banter, Stanislavsky takes a holiday from his more serious rôles and proves himself master as well of more fleeting and light-fingered fancies in the part of the count. His wife, Mme. Lilina, an expert actress of charming personality, makes a perfect foil for him in the rôle of Daria Ivanovna.

Aside from these four works, Turgenieff is represented in dramatic form by other less known and less regarded compositions which are seldom if ever presented in the theatre. One of them, *The Bachelor*, is a long play in three acts, but it is notably inferior to *A Month in the Country*. *Imprudence* is a comedy in one act, and *Breakfast at a Nobleman's Home* is another of the same type; while there are three sketches that are little more than

conversations: *Pennilessness*, *A Colloquy on the High Road*, and *An Evening at Sorrento*. The fate of these lesser *études* probably deserves to be that which thus far has unfortunately been the lot of the major works.

To those who know Turgenieff as novelist, these brief notes will indicate a marked similarity of method and treatment in his plays and his stories. In both *genres* he was concerned primarily with character portrayal and with the half-tones of mood and feeling as a background for these portraits. In both, his method was, on the whole, that of the realist, but the realist as romancer rather than the realist as morbid analyst or propagandist. The nobility of his spirit and the fineness of his imagination, inherent in all his work, justify the consideration of his plays in any study which the western world may make of his genius.

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